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C O N F I D E N T I A L PARIS 05608

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 005608

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/21/2116
TAGS: PREL MARR FR LE KPKO UNSC
SUBJECT: UNIFIL: HELPING FRANCE MEET ITS RESPONSIBILITIES

Classified By: CDA Karl Hofmann, for reasons 1.4 (B and D)

¶1. (C) Summary: French-U.S. cooperation has been significant to the restoration of sovereignty and the progress of democracy in Lebanon over the past two years. We have an interest in preserving that partnership, even in the face of disappointment over France's modest contribution thus far to a reinforced UNIFIL. We do not yet know if the GOF decision to deploy 200 additional troops signals a refusal to take a leading role in UNIFIL-plus, or is in fact a first step toward a significant French contribution. The French MOD has from the outset argued against a significant contribution, claiming lack of clarity on the new UNIFIL's mission, rules of engagement and command structure. The GOF has made no effort to produce such clarification on its own terms. Why has Chirac risked disappointing international expectations, harming France's credibility? A number of explanations come to mind: Chirac's trademark procrastination, concerns about his legacy as he winds up his presidency, a heightened sense of potential exposure to Iranian and Syrian targeting, and the fragility of the cease-fire. That said, we believe Chirac has not completely closed the door to a leading French role in UNIFIL-plus. We should consider offering high-level consultations with the GOF, in Paris or New York, to address how the U.S. might assist France satisfy its desiderata on UNIFIL's conops, ROEs, and command and control. A senior-level Washington call to President Chirac might help focus French thinking. End Summary.

¶2. (C) We do not yet know the final dimensions of France's

contribution to UNIFIL-plus. While an expectation had built that France would deploy from 2,500 to 4,000 troops and lead a reinforced UNIFIL (something the GOF never explicitly stated), President Chirac has thus far agreed only to a doubling of France's 200-strong pre-July 12 contingent. According to the Presidency, France may yet contribute more; a significantly larger second-phase reinforcement remains possible. We have been told that this could consist, in whole or in part, of a rapid reaction force, responsible for force protection, perhaps within but more likely outside of UNIFIL command. Any such decision would be taken by President Chirac, in consultation with PM de Villepin, MFA Douste-Blazy, and MOD Alliot-Marie. The earliest such a meeting might take place would be Thursday, August 24.

¶3. (C) French-U.S. cooperation on Lebanon (and Syria) has been crucial over the past two years, extending from UNSCR 1559 to 1701. The progress achieved during that time -- Syria's withdrawal, the emergence of the March 14 group, its parliamentary election victory and assumption of the leadership of the government, the UN's continuing investigation of the Hariri assassination -- owed much to that cooperation. French steadfastness and diplomatic activism, a reflection of President Chirac's personal interest and leadership, provided an effective European partner in support of an important democratic advance in the Middle East. We have a strong interest in preserving that partnership for future use, bearing also in mind our commonality of interest with regard to Iran and Syria. How we address France's thus far disappointing response on UNIFIL has important ramifications for the future of that partnership.

¶4. (C) Why hasn't France assumed its putative UNIFIL responsibilities? France, in this case, is Chirac; he has assumed personal control of the decision-making process. He appears to have been won over by the MOD argument that French troops in a UNIFIL-plus would not be empowered and protected by a sufficiently clear mission, robust rules of engagement, and the kind of command and control arrangements required in a dangerous and volatile environment. If this is Chirac's main concern, it is not clear why the French have not taken the initiative in defining and demanding whatever it is they think their requirements. Instead, they, and MOD Alliot-Marie in particular, complain petulantly about lack of clarity, as if they have nothing to contribute to the process and no lines into DPKO. In short, they have been a model of passivity in a context of urgency.

¶5. (C) At this point, we can only guess why such concerns have prevented Chirac from assuming a role consistent with France's sense of itself and its special responsibility for Lebanon.

-- Is it his reflexive caution, his trademark refusal to be forced to make a decision until he has absolutely no other choice, always hoping that with additional time more palatable options will emerge?

-- Is it legacy concerns about irresponsibly sending French troops off to their deaths during the final months of his Presidency?

-- Is his caution fed by a grim French analysis concerning the likelihood that the cease-fire will not hold in any case, or that the Iranians and Syrians will actively target the French.

¶6. (C) Any or all of the above are possible, but what is more troubling is Chirac's apparent willingness to squander the good will he has earned with the U.S. over the past two years, along with the diplomatic and political capital he has expended to demonstrate how much France still counts in the region. This is certainly not the outcome the MFA, faithful to its vision of France's regional role, prefers. The peculiarities of the political moment do not lend themselves to a snowballing of domestic pressure. It seems unlikely that Presidential hopefuls Segolene Royal or Nicolas Sarkozy, neither of whom are particularly comfortable on foreign policy terrain, will take this on as an issue, although Royal, in a speech August 20, vaguely warned against France

"standing aside." Le Monde has weighed in editorially, along with Dominique Moisi, a notable pundit, calling on France to lead UNIFIL. It is possible, even in August, that the political class will wake up and take up the cause, but as of now there are few signs that will happen.

¶7. (C) An offer: We should take the GOF at its word that a final decision on the extent of France's participation has not yet been made. There remains, at least for a few days, an opportunity to influence France to follow its own interests, despite the considerable risks, and assume a leadership role in UNIFIL-plus. We should consider offering to help the French formulate their own requirements for UNIFIL's mission, rules of engagement, and command structure, and work together to see that they are satisfied in New York.

We might also consider what the U.S. could offer in the way of logistical, intelligence or planning support to a French-led UNIFIL. If the French were receptive, a high-level PM/IO team could meet with them in New York or Paris to work through both elements -- before any final decision by the GOF. A high-level phone call to Chirac could also help focus French thinking. We will continue to explore French receptivity, and to help push the GOF to live up to its rhetoric of responsibility. We welcome Washington views on this approach.

¶8. (C) A caution: As we continue to support international efforts to field a robust and credible UNIFIL-plus, we should try to avoid any scenario that weakens the potential for future partnership with France on Lebanon, Syria and Iran. Even if in the end France flinches definitively on UNIFIL, our own interests will not be served by contributing further to France's loss of credibility.

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